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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 001859

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/07/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [MARR](#) [IZ](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR KING ABDULLAH'S VISIT TO U.S.  
(MARCH 14-22)

Classified By: CDA David Hale for Reasons 1.4 ((b), (d))

1. (S) King Abdullah is very pleased to be returning to the U.S. after his most recent visit in December 2004. The King, who sees his strategic interests as intertwined with our own regional agenda, remains committed to supporting our efforts to stabilize Iraq, advance Israeli-Palestinian peace, combat terrorism, and promote regional reforms. Now six years on the throne, the King remains the driving force of what is a top-down reform process. Impatient with the pace of his cabinet's and parliament's action on the reform agenda, but apparently not yet ready for another cabinet change, the King recently went around them by appointing two royal commissions. One will study the establishment of regional assemblies with devolved powers, and the other brings a range of civil society representatives together to "establish a national agenda."

2. (S) While some activists question the King's motives, seeing the commissions as a device to deflect calls for more democratization, the King is insistent that he sees these commissions as essential and irreversible steps toward grass-roots democratization. With successful and credible elections having occurred in January on two sides of his kingdom, the King is also keen to keep Jordan's own home-grown reform momentum going, and to garner international credit and support for doing so. The ouster of the Lebanese government by a popular movement, and the Egyptian announcement of multi-candidate presidential elections, have reinforced the King's determination to appear in the vanguard of political reform in the region. Jordan welcomes opportunities to host regional G8/BMENA/MEPI events, examples including a meeting of Arab justice ministers in February, and recent investment and corporate governance conferences. On the margins of the May 2005 Dead Sea WEF Jordan will host a G8/BMENA ministerial focused on educational reform.

3. (S) On Iraq, the King is heartened by news that President Bush has secured European commitments to help more. He will reiterate his own readiness to play any supportive role we and the Iraqi authorities identify, although he may be receiving inconsistent signals from different arms of the USG (as well as from Iraqi officials) on how (or whether) Jordan should help encourage more Sunni Arab leaders to join the political process. The King has begun to adjust to the reality that he will be dealing with a representative and democratically elected government in Baghdad, meaning one in which Shi'a take their fair share of power. In private, he will reiterate concerns about the importance of including credible, untainted Sunni leaders in the political process as well as his fear of Iranian efforts to manipulate political opportunities now available to Iraq's Shi'a.

4. (S) The King and Foreign Minister have been blunt with the Syrian leadership, reinforcing our message on the need for fundamental changes in Syrian behavior. Their admonitions, both in public and in private, on the need for immediate and full Syrian compliance with UNSCR 1559 have been among the most direct and assertive in the Arab world. However, Foreign Minister Mulki has advocated that in addition to the sticks now being applied on Syria, a small carrot is in order, by way of encouraging us and the Israelis to at least give Damascus a hearing on what it may have to offer in the Syrian-Israeli peace track. A frank assessment of our own and Israeli views on Syrian offers in this direction would be helpful. Jordan and Syria recently signed an agreement settling a long-running border dispute, but the King and his senior advisors remain skeptical of Syrian promises to try to intercept the flow of terrorists and their material across that border.

5. (S) The King will repeat his December, 2004 pledge to the President to "stick his neck out" for the U.S. on Iraq, Israel-Palestine, and regional reform, and he will repeat his argument that Jordan needs extra help because pressure from regional security problems put extra pressure on him. He is grateful for the Administration's request for supplemental assistance, but had naturally hoped for more. The King visited Riyadh March 6 to lobby for a renewal of the Saudis' oil grant which, along with similar cash and oil support from the UAE and Kuwait, has been keeping Jordan's economy afloat since March, 2003. The Foreign Minister delivered similar messages in Abu Dhabi and Kuwait in February.

6. (S) Jordan merits our warm thanks for its work on behalf

of our common interests and readiness to take domestic political flak on issues ranging from the return of a Jordanian ambassador to Tel Aviv to the December 2004 signing of the article 98 agreement. The issues on the Jordan/Israel agenda -- highlighted by Foreign Minister Mulki's recent trip to Israel -- are the on-again, off-again proposals for a visit to Jordan by FM Shalom, and related Jordanian calls for the release of at least some Jordanian prisoners held in Israel for pre-peace treaty crimes. We should encourage these two partners to work out their issues together.

HALE